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Accord reached on airport security Screeners will be federal employees

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Friday, November 16, 2001

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URL: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2001/11/16/MN163246.DTL>

Washington -- The nation's airport screeners will become federal employees within a year under an agreement reached yesterday by House and Senate negotiators, ending a weeks-long impasse over airline security legislation.

Under pressure to restore passengers' confidence before the busiest travel week of the year, Democratic and Republican leaders fashioned a deal that will put more air marshals on planes, require secure cockpit doors and order more background checks on airport workers.

The House and Senate are expected to approve the measure today, allowing President Bush to sign the bill before Thanksgiving.

Lawmakers and administration officials said the legislation would make the nation's skies safer, even though many of the security measures won't be fully implemented for at least a year.

"Thanks to this legislation, Americans who travel to celebrate with their loved ones will do so in greater security," Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta said.

Airline passengers will pay for the new security -- \$2.50 for every nonstop flight and a \$5 for a trip that includes one or more connecting flights. Passengers would pay no more than a \$10 fee on a round-trip ticket.

Lawmakers on a conference committee have spent the past few weeks trying to reconcile differences in airline security bills passed by the House and Senate.

The Senate bill called for making all screeners federal workers, while the House measure left it up to the administration to decide whether screeners should become civil servants or remain employees of private security companies.

Under the deal, lawmakers agreed to form a new agency within the Department of Transportation in charge of transportation security. The agency must certify that federal screeners are in place within one year.

The legislation also requires that all checked luggage be screened for bombs and explosives by Dec. 31, 2002. Less than 10 percent of checked luggage is screened now.

The compromise was a blow to House Republican leaders, who were strongly opposed to adding 28,000 unionized workers to the federal payroll.

To placate Republicans, lawmakers agreed to let airports opt out of the system after three years and use local law enforcement or private security firms if they meet new federal standards.

Negotiators also agreed to let five unspecified airports join a pilot program in which private screeners will be monitored to see if they do the job as well as government employees.

"We're going to see whether the private sector can best deliver this under federal supervision or if you have to have federal screeners," said House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill.

Democrats said growing public concern about air safety had forced House GOP leaders and the White House to back down on their opposition to making airport screeners federal workers.

"I think the air crash in Queens really was a signal to everyone," said Sen.

Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. "Even if this time it wasn't necessarily terrorism, the House Republican leadership had to feel in the pit of their stomachs that tomorrow it could be a bomb."

PRIVATE SECURITY ENDS

The legislation effectively ends the era of private security at the nation's airports. Private firms have been harshly criticized in Congress for high turnover among employees and a spotty record of locating weapons in the screening process.

"It will finally scrap the private security system that is failing people as we speak," said House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt, D-Mo.

While the new screeners will be allowed to join a union, they will not be allowed to strike. The screeners also can be fired more easily than other federal workers. And the new legislation requires that all screeners be U.S. citizens.

Unlike their predecessors -- who often were minimum wage workers -- the new federal employees will be guaranteed higher wages. The starting yearly salary would be \$31,000, congressional sources said.

"I don't think they will have a need to strike because they are going to be treated with dignity and respect," Boxer said. "It's going to become a very professional position, as opposed to the lowest on the totem pole."

THOROUGH BACKGROUND CHECKS

The legislation also requires anti-hijacking training for flight crew members and anti-terrorism training for skycaps. It calls for thorough background checks on employees who work near or on planes, including caterers and maintenance workers.

"If you're going to go near the plane, if you're going to touch the plane, if you're going to change the windshield wiper fluid, . . . we have to make sure you are not someone who is going to turn the plane into a weapon of mass destruction," said Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Walnut Creek, a member of the House Transportation Committee.

The measure requires airlines to e-mail to the U.S. Customs Service the manifests of all international flights, with the names of passengers and crew members, so they can be checked against a database of suspected terrorists.

Negotiators agreed to provide \$1.5 billion to airports for more baggage screening machines, security cameras and guards. Congressional leaders said they expect airports to immediately increase the percentage of checked bags that get screened.

"It's a big hole we have to fill," said Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, a member of the House Transportation Committee. "The sooner we do this, the sooner the flying public has the confidence to go back and start to fly."

MORE GUARDSMAN IN STATE

In California yesterday, Gov. Gray Davis said an additional 245 National Guard troops would be stationed at 23 airports through Jan. 6.

The increase was made at the request of Bush to help Americans feel more secure about flying during the holidays. The federal government will pay for it.

In San Francisco, 37 extra Guardsmen will help with perimeter defense and vehicle inspections, Davis said.

At Oakland's airport, the troops will provide curbside and terminal patrols.

San Jose will have another 15 troops patrolling terminals and at security checkpoints.

About 800 National Guard troops were stationed at 30 airports across the state after the Sept. 11 attacks. They are expected to remain on the job for six months.

TIGHTENING SECURITY

Key provisions of an aviation security bill that House and Senate negotiators agreed on yesterday:

-- Airport screening: Within a year, all baggage screening will be done by federal employees who are U.S. citizens.

For three years, all commercial airports will be under the federal system except for five airports, of five different sizes, that volunteer for a pilot program to test different approaches. After three years, airports that meet strict federal standards will have the option to move to a system using local law enforcement officials or private firms.

-- Checked bags: Airports have 60 days to expand inspections of checked bags. Full explosive detection systems should be in place by the end of 2002. Airports will be required to maximize the use of equipment to detect and neutralize biological and chemical weapons.

-- Oversight: A new agency in the Transportation Department will have jurisdiction over security.

-- Technology: The Transportation Department will develop a database to allow the cross-checking of names on watch lists of federal law enforcement agencies. Airlines will be allowed to implement "trusted passenger" programs to expedite screening.

Intelligence reports on terrorism must be shared with the Transportation Department.

-- Airplanes: Cockpit doors must be strengthened, and they must remain locked during flight. Video cameras may be provided to alert pilots to cabin activity.

The number of federal air marshals is to be increased, and they must be placed on every "high risk" flight. A switch must be located in the cabin for flight attendants to notify pilots of hijacking. The Transportation Department is allowed to authorize use of weapons in cockpits.

-- Fees: A \$2.50 passenger fee for each emplanement, with a maximum of \$5 for one trip.

-- Liability: Provides limited liability for the owners of the World Trade Center buildings and others harmed by the Sept. 11 attacks. . Source: Associated Press

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